A Phenomenological Approach to *Donnie Darko*

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Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko* (2001) is a coming-of-age tale about a possibly psychotic teenager who is told by a boy in a rabbit suit named Frank that the world will end. The title character Donnie Darko investigates time travel and sacrifices himself to save his girlfriend, his mother, and the world. The film commences by placing reality in question. The camera slowly pans from a luscious shot of a mountain ridge at dawn to the pajama wearing Donnie asleep in the middle of a road. The viewer identifies with the protagonist's bleary-eyed disorientation, for at times the film seems to take place in Donnie's dreamy, schizophrenic mind and at other times it feels real, like a world in science fiction film. Not only is reality in question, but moral philosophy as well. The film unspools a plot involving Donnie unwittingly causing a series of events in which the closest people in his life perish. He must learn the philosophy of time travel and consider taking his own life to prevent his loved ones' deaths. After acknowledging that the film 'transitions seamlessly from a surface realism to surreal dream sequences to science fiction without settling firmly on any one style,' Peter Mathews (2005) concentrates on the moral philosophy undergirding the film's questions of fate, tragedy, and alternate realities; he concludes that, for *Donnie Darko*, 'reality is made up of contingencies that project us through our possible lives.' This essay builds upon Mathews' approach by commencing with the slide between science fiction, delusion, and dream worlds and then moving from philosophical questions to artistic concerns. It first compares the standard phenomenological ways to regard the film, namely science fiction worlds, psychotic delusion, and coming-of-age dream. Second, it poses a new and divergent reading of the world of the film: it is neither Donnie's destiny, delusion, nor dream but rather Frank's story, his work of art. Third, in contrasting the ambitious and ambiguous feature film with the longer and frankly more clarified director's cut in terms of world and world view, the analysis concludes that what the director's cut gains in viewer intelligibility it loses in artistic integrity. We normally think that a director's cut restores the auteur's original vision that was compromised by the studio system for time constraints or palatability concerns. However, this director's cut sacrifices deeper and more complex psycho-existential questions for simpler and more superficial Hollywood heroic answers.

The Standard Readings: Science Fiction, Psychosis, Dream

The challenge of film analysis derives from the film's unstable ontology: Is the world of *Donnie Darko* (the film) a dream, a hallucination, reality, or merely one reality among multiple universes? Does Donnie Darko (the character) sleep, delude, wake, or imagine? Examining the film from a comparative phenomenological perspective allows us first and foremost to clarify the underlying relationship between Donnie and the world and in so doing illuminate the meaning of Donnie's death: if one reads the film as science fiction, then Donnie dies a singular hero saving the world; if as psychosis, then he is a confused suicide who could not bear the world anymore. Jean-Paul Sartre's translator and critic, Hazel Barnes (1959), asserts, 'The task of the existentialist psychoanalyst is less that of the guide who points the way to hidden treasure and more that of the teacher who tries to make the student see the connection between two ideas which are already before him' (p. 280). An authentic interpretation of *Donnie Darko* must mediate *both* phenomenological states without falling prey to the quest for 'hidden treasure' in the form of final answers. However, the film provides more than two possibilities: in addition to sci-fi and psychosis, there is also dream and art. The tension between these opposing frames gives the film its tragic meaning: In the final analysis that mediates all four phenomenological possibilities without choosing one over the other three, Donnie is rendered as a sixteen-year-old boy who encounters the cruel and overwhelming world and contemplates (but does not necessary act on) sacrificing himself in order to save his loved ones (as well as his own psyche) from that world. The film entertains issues of martyrdom, self-sacrifice, and suicide without glorifying them; and instead asserts the power of art to traverse coming-of-age anxiety, psychotic fragmentation, and death itself. The director's cut dramatically diffuses that fourfold tension by highlighting alternative universes and the essentially satisfying, though perhaps not existentially desirable, martyred sci-fi superhero theme.

Science Fiction: 'Fate up against Your Will'

> Fate
> Up against your will
> Through the thick and thin
> He will wait until
> You give yourself to him
> (Echo & The Bunnymen, 'The Killing Moon')

The theatrical release (hereafter simply 'the film') opens at sunrise on October

2nd with Donnie asleep in the middle of mountain road. Echo & The Bunnymen plays over Donnie riding his ten-speed home, first passing a Trans Am that will later be revealed as Frank's, then navigating his innocent and dew-dropped suburban streets, until finally arriving at his picturesque home where his father teases his older sister with a leaf blower, his young sister bounces on a trampoline, and his mother lounges on the patio leisurely reading Stephen King's *It*. Overall, the *mise-en-scène* so far suggests the optimism and perfection of the Reagan Era 'Morning in America' dream. However, the novel *It* should alert knowing viewers that they are about to enter a film that unmasks the rosy facade of small-town life to reveal childhood trauma through the narrative point of view of alternating time periods and the generic lens of science fiction posing questions about the nature of the universe. Moreover, the Echo & The Bunnymen song sets up another important issue: fate versus free will, that is, does the universe destine the individual to act a preordained way, or does the human being have the ability to choose? The song answers that fundamental question by declaring that He (Fate, God, the Creator of the Universe) will wait until you choose to act in accordance to 'God's master plan.' As 'The Killing Moon' fades, Donnie walks to the kitchen and reads the loaded question 'Where is Donnie?' scrawled on the whiteboard. Indeed, where is Donnie literally and physically? Existentially and psychologically? Ontologically and metaphysically? Putting the psycho-existential question on hold for now, in what reality is Donnie?

Later that night, a voice (or is it a voiceover?) commands Donnie to 'Wake up.' As the entranced or sleepwalking Donnie exits his home, the voice says, 'I've been watching you. Come closer. Closer.' Through the darkness of night, the dazed Donnie spies a rabbit suited figure who declares, '28 days, 6 hours, 42 minutes, 12 seconds. That is when the world will end.' Donnie: 'Why?' A jet engine falls from nowhere and crashes on Donnie's bed, miraculously unoccupied thanks to the rabbit's nocturnal summons.

The science fiction reading of the film focuses on the threefold metaphysical mystery of the boy in the rabbit suit whose name we eventually learn to be Frank, the jet engine appearing from the void, and the impending apocalypse. Over the course of the twenty-eight days Frank becomes Donnie's Obi-Wan Kenobi, the wise yet forceful advisor to that other celestial savior, Luke Skywalker. When Donnie sees Frank in the bathroom mirror and asks him, 'How can you do that?' the time-hopping bunny replies, 'I can do anything I want and so can you.' Donnie touches the mirror turned liquid, which is uncannily reminiscent of the 'down the rabbit hole' sequence in another reality-warping sci-fi film, *The Matrix*. Frank acts as a half-blinded prophetic advisor (when he takes off his mask, he reveals a gouged and bleeding right eye) from the future by instructing Donnie to break school water mains and burn down a house in an

enigmatic-until-the-ending master plot to correct the world gone awry. Paradoxically, Frank's orders set in motion a chain of events that kill Donnie's girlfriend, Donnie's mother and sister, and even Frank himself. On October 30th, Donnie's girlfriend is ironically hit by the Trans Am driven by current Frank in a Halloween rabbit costume which causes Donnie to shoot Frank in the right eye, killing him. When Donnie burns down the house of a prominent self-help guru who turns out to be a pedophile, the school counselor rushes to his legal defense and asks Donnie's mother to go with the dance group that includes Donnie's sister to *Star Search*: their October 30th flight loses a jet engine in a thunderstorm and the engine falls through a time portal into Donnie's bedroom on October 2.

According to the ontological hints of the feature film (as opposed to the director's cut that leaves little to the viewer's imagination), the world will end unless Donnie learns how to travel in time, accept his fate, and save the future. Donnie discusses time travel with his science teacher:

> DONNIE: If you could see your path or channel growing out of your stomach, you could see into the future. And that's a form of time travel, right?
> DR. MONNITOFF: You are contradicting yourself, Donnie. If we could see our destinies manifest themselves visually then we would be given the choice to betray our chosen destinies. The very fact that this choice exists would mean that all pre-formed destiny would end.
> DONNIE: Not if you chose to stay within God's channel.

His instructor points Donnie to the book *The Philosophy of Time Travel* by Roberta Sparrow, which plays an important role in both the film's official website and the director's cut. The time paradox of the film is that the things Frank told Donnie to do are precisely what kill Donnie's girlfriend, Donnie's mother and sister, and Frank himself. However, Fate resolves the paradox. Donnie must learn to accept his Fate; he must choose to go through a portal terminating in his bed on October 2nd. In other words, he must die so his girlfriend, his mother and sister, and Frank will live.

The quasi-religious science fiction frame narrative suggests a phenomenological relationship between Donnie and not one but *two* worlds, the first world in which he miraculously lives and the second in which he must choose to meet his predestined Fate in order to fall in accord with 'God's path,' as prophesized to him by God's messenger, Frank. These worlds are connected by time-traveling wormholes that Donnie learns to detect and ride through Roberta Sparrow's book, *The Philosophy of Time Travel*. Ultimately, this narrative frame constitutes the most psychologically and existentially simplistic

aspect of the film: Parallel universes, time travel, and Fate/God are real. You must first realize that free will does not exist and then you must sacrifice yourself to save your girlfriend, your mother and sister, and the entire world. Essential answers quash existential questions. Donnie becomes a superhero not because his girlfriend says that his name reminds her of one but because he chooses his fate.

Psychosis and/or Dream: 'It's a Mad World'

> And I find it kind of funny
> I find it kind of sad
> The dreams in which I'm dying are the best I've ever had
> I find it hard to tell you
> I find it hard to take
> When people run in circles it's a very very
> Mad World
>
> (Gary Jules covering Tears for Fears, 'Mad World')

'Mad World' plays over the closing montage of restless would-be sleepers in Donnie's world who include his therapist, his teachers, the self-help guru, his guidance counselor, the girl who has a crush on him, and Frank as the jet engine crushes Donnie in his bed on the night of October 2nd. The film poses another reading: what if the bulk of the film's plot constitutes either Donnie's dream or his psychotic delusion? Not a sci-fi world in which 'Fate up against your will,' but rather a dream world or a 'Mad World'? The evidence for Donnie's psychosis is readily apparent: he suffers from not only auditory hallucinations commanding him to destroy the school and burn down a house but also visual hallucinations in the form of a boy in a rabbit suit as well as 'God's channel' wormholes growing out of people's chests; over the course of the film he becomes utterly convinced that the world is going to end in '28 days, 6 hours, 42 minutes, 12 seconds.' The film intercuts two important scenes that illustrate the tension between the sci-fi reality and psychotic delusion. During a bathroom scene in which Donnie stabs at the liquid mirror trying to break through to Frank, causing Frank's right eye to radiate light, the film jumps back and forth to a scene of Donnie's therapist, Dr. Thurman, providing Donnie's parents with a diagnosis:

> Donnie's aggressive behavior, his increased detachment from reality, seems to stem from his inability to cope with the forces in the world that he perceives to be threatening… Donnie is experiencing what is commonly called a daylight hallucination. This is a common occurrence among

paranoid schizophrenics.

In the next section, we will discuss those 'threatening forces.' In 'Where Is Donnie? A Discussion of the Imaginary and the Symbolic in *Donnie Darko*,' Catherine Bradley (2007) takes a Kristevan approach to Donnie's diagnosis by 'placing Donnie in flux between the Imaginary and the Symbolic' (p. 79). She notes how the film is constantly 'shifting between the fantastical world of the imaginary and the realistic world of the symbolic' (p. 80), where the Imaginary is the Kristevan Semiotic chora of pure perceptions and chaotic drives and the Symbolic refers to the Freudian Symbolic order of Patriarchy rules and laws from which Donnie is so alienated that he swings an axe to its representative school statue. Suffice it to say that my 'diagnosis' of Donnie's character is also psychoanalytic. This film does not portray a whimsical fancy like that of James Stewart in *Harvey* (Henry Koster, 1950); instead, it seems to represent *either* paranoid schizophrenia, a fragmented mind dreading the imminent apocalypse of its own lonely collapse, *or* a sci-fi world in which a young boy must learn to harness time travel to save the world. If one reads the jet engine crash as real and not part of Donnie's delusion, then one must also regard *The Philosophy of Time Travel* as real, and Donnie is not a disturbed, suicidal psychotic but a tragic superheroic martyr. If, on the other hand, one reads the jet engine free fall as part of Donnie's delusional thinking, then one is forced to wonder if there is actually any 'reality' in this 'Mad World.'

The film does not limit itself to 'easy' either/or phenomenological possibilities, for one more psychological likelihood exists. Given the predominance of sleeping in the film (the opening shot finds Donnie asleep in the middle of the road, Frank tells him to 'wake up,' Donnie sleepwalks to a golf course, Donnie is crushed while he sleeps, the film's conclusion features a montage of would-be sleepers), everything that occurs after Donnie originally retires to bed might be his *bildungsroman* dream or coming-of-age nightmare. Rather than being a call to consciousness, Frank's 'wake up' may be dream's demand for the unconsciousness to reveal itself. Since dreams use the residue of reality to work through repressed desires and unbearable issues, the characters and relationships in Donnie's dream can correspond to his waking life, but the extraordinary plot elements do not have to be taken as sci-fi or delusion. In therapy, Donnie discloses that he does not believe in God and fears dying alone. The time traveling in 'God's channel' adventure thereby becomes Donnie working through his religious doubts and coming to terms with death, both normal issues for an adolescent to contemplate. Another typical aspect of teenage development is morality. Both Donnie and the film ridicule dichotomous thinking in favor of ethical complexity that mirrors the film's phenomenological

convolutions. As a disciple of self-help guru Jim Cunningham, who preaches a gospel of love and fear, the guidance counselor, Kitty Farmer, reduces complex ethical questions to a series of flashcards with either/or underpinnings: 'Ling Ling finds a wallet on the ground filled with money. She takes the wallet to the address on the driver's license but keeps the money inside the wallet.' While Donnie is supposed to mark on the Lifeline whether this moral story problem arises from Love or Fear, he,

> just [doesn't] get this. Everything can't be lumped into two categories. That's too simple… So what if Ling Ling kept the cash and returned the wallet? That has nothing to do with either fear or love. There are other things that need to be taken into account here. Like the whole spectrum of human emotion.

When an anxious student asks Cunningham how to decide what he wants to be when he grows up, Cunningham advises, 'I think you should look deep within yourself, deep within your heart and find what it is in the world that makes you feel *love*. Just pure *love*. And then go do that. In your studies, in your athletics, go towards love.' Cunningham counsels a bullied student who wants to learn how to defend himself to love instead because 'Violence is a product of fear. Those who love themselves enough should have no need to fight another person. Learn to truly love yourself... and the world will be yours.' Unable to bear such simplistic recommendations, Donnie calls Cunningham 'the fucking anti-Christ.' In Donnie's fantasy of burning down Cunningham's house, Cunningham is revealed to be a pedophile with a kiddy dungeon in his basement.

Apart from developing a complex emotional morality in reaction to such facile guidance at school, Donnie feels alienated from his family; he is the black sheep, the outcast. His mother, Rose, tries to (re)connect with her lost son: 'You know, it would be nice to look at you some time and see my son. I don't recognize this person today.' However, all the frustrated boy can do is call her 'Bitch.' Through the course of the film, Donnie realizes that his mother truly loves him. Near the end of the dream, Donnie asks, 'How does it feel to have a wacko for a son?' and his mother responds, without missing a beat, 'It feels wonderful.' Besides finding his morality and making his emotional way back into the family fold and especially his mother's embrace, Donnie's paramount adolescent crisis is sexuality, the conflict between his hormonal demands to fuck and his emotional desires to love. On the one hand, hypnotherapy reveals that he obsessively thinks about sex and his forward conversations with his new girlfriend Gretchen about going together and kissing illustrates an eagerness typical of any teen boy; on the other hand, they develop an authentic emotional

bond over their mutual issues such as his emotional problems and her father's domestic abuse, and Donnie seeks to overcome his issues and save her: 'I guess some people are just born with tragedy.' Donnie respects and loves her for her complex honesty that corresponds to his own mother's sincerity and directly opposes Mrs. Farmer's and Jim Cunningham's emotional artificiality. Perhaps Gretchen is real or perhaps she is merely a figment of Donnie's dream; either way, she symbolizes his need for salvation through an emotionally mature relationship that mediates problems through intersubjectivity and self-sacrifice. Unlike Cunningham and Farmer's reductive Love/Fear Lifelines, this relationship with Gretchen helps Donnie come to terms with living and dying.

Art: Portrait of the *Eye*

While the songs 'The Killing Moon' and 'Mad World' suggest Donnie's phenomenological relationships with the world—science fiction fate and fantastical dream or delusion, respectively—the film's visual cues with regard to art such as the portrait of a woman in Donnie's psychiatrist's office, of the rabbit suit affixed to Donnie's calendar, and the print of M. C. Escher's *Eye* beside Donnie's bed point to a final possibility of the film's reality not touched upon by critics. When we first see Donnie in his room, at first glance he does not appear to be alone. The bedroom shot frames Donnie in bed on the right and M. C. Escher's *Eye* on the left. Moreover, the shot is composed like a conversation scene and implicitly suggests a dialogue (or dialectic) between Donnie and the print. The print itself is an extreme close-up of an eye with a skull reflected in the pupil. A few moments before, 'The Killing Moon' sang Donnie's fate and now the painting artistically portrays it. The communion of artwork and subject is made even more explicit directly before Donnie's sacrifice of self to plane engine. At the Halloween party Donnie dresses up as a skeleton and Gretchen is killed. A shot commences with an extreme close up of the skull in the pupil of the *Eye* and the camera zooms out and pans over to reveal Donnie laughing in bed. The film rewinds and the engine kills Donnie. Donnie's death is prepared for not only in art but in literature earlier on in the film. Donnie's English teacher identifies Donnie with the Graham Greene short story they are discussing: 'Donnie Darko, perhaps, given your recent brush with mass destruction, you can give us your opinion?' Indeed, Donnie understands the subject of the story quite well: 'Destruction is a form of creation. So the fact that they burn the money is... ironic. They just want to see what happens when they tear the world apart.' Just as Escher's *Eye* constitutes Donnie's reflection, Greene's theme is Donnie's own.

The film equates not just Donnie but also his therapist and his sister's boyfriend with art. As Dr. Thurman hypnotizes Donnie, the camera zooms out from an extreme close up of a portrait of a woman's face on the wall and pans to

Dr. Thurman's face, resting at the same angle as the portrait. This match between the portrait and the real woman suggests neither alternate realities nor delusional worlds but rather artistic frames of reality, what is called meta-fiction in literature. Finally, at one point in the film, the camera lingers on a wall calendar. On the one hand, this marks the countdown of days until Frank the rabbit says the world will end. On the other hand, someone has taped a handmade drawing of the rabbit suit over the calendar's real picture, which implies that someone in or close to the family is an artist and Donnie is creating his Frank-the-rabbit delusion from that art. At the Halloween party, the audience learns that Donnie's sister's boyfriend is named Frank; and it is this same Frank, who the refrigerator whiteboard informs us, 'was here / Went to get beer,' who accidentally runs over Gretchen in his Trans Am (the same car from the beginning of the film) on his beer run and is subsequently shot in the right eye and killed by Donnie. The 'Mad World' montage closes with Frank. The camera pans from 1) a life study painting of a nude woman to 2) an artist's workbench cluttered with various supplies and three incomplete charcoal drawings of Frank's rabbit mask and finds 3) Frank sitting on the floor with an expression of unknown grief; about to weep he brings his hand to his right eye as the camera finally rests and fades out on his rabbit mask. Frank is the film's resident artist who also happens to be Donnie's guide. Through the plethora of artistic references, the film calls attention to itself as a work of art dealing with fundamental existential questions of life and death, fate and free will. Jonathan Eig (2011) vets the possibility that Donnie's story is imagined by his mother just prior to the final wave with Gretchen: 'Donnie did in fact die in the first draft of time […] and the subsequent drama has been imagined by his mother, unable to cope with her part in her son's tragedy.' The current reading builds on Eig's apt interpretation of bereavement by taking into account the interest Kelly's camera takes in close ups of artwork. In other words, while the phenomenological status of the film could be that of his mother's mournful imagination, it could also be that of his sister's friend's artistic representation of grief. Frank could be giving Donnie's life meaning in his artwork.

One of the ways that a film brings its audience into the psyche of its protagonist is through voiceover narration. What if Frank's 'wake up' command was neither Donnie's auditory hallucination nor his time-traveling future self? What if Frank's 'wake up' was the artist-narrator's call for the audience to raise their consciousness from the dream-world they were lounging into and to an artistic mediation of life and death issues of catastrophic anxiety and psychological fragmentation? What if the entire film is Donnie's sister's boyfriend's imaginative reverie or his work of art (a comic book perhaps?) that seeks to understand the seemingly meaningless suicide of his girlfriend's

brother? What if Donnie was a troubled kid who killed himself and nobody understood why? What if his family generally blamed themselves for not being able to save him? What if Frank felt especially guilty because Donnie incorporated Frank's art into his suicidal delusion? What if the artist created a work of art that would take responsibility? The artist encounters death and his work of art exists as a way to comprehend and to explain, to find meaning in and to give purpose to death which may exist with or without meaning because death by its nature exists beyond the limits of our experiential knowledge. The previous three phenomenological approaches seek to explain death, or at least mediate our dread of it: the sci-fi heroic self-sacrifice, paranoid schizophrenia, and the coming-of-age dream anxious about life and death and everything in between (sexuality, family, religion, morality). This theory postulates that the film *Donnie Darko* is an existential work of artistic mourning that traverses primary psychological states—superheroic power, psychotic fragmentation, and anxiety. M. C. Escher's meta-artwork *Eye* and Frank's rabbit art work together not only to compel Donnie to meditate upon his death but also to eject the viewer outside of the film's narrative and contemplate how the artwork mediates and the artist mourns death.

The Director's Cut: From 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' to 'Never Tear Us Apart'

> You cry out in your sleep, all my failings exposed
> And there's a taste in my mouth as desperation takes hold
> Is it something so good just can't function no more
> But love, love will tear us apart again
> Love, love will tear us apart again
> (Joy Division, 'Love Will Tear Us Apart')

> I told you
> That we could fly
> cause we all have wings
> But some of us don't know why
> I
> I was standing
> You were there
> Two worlds collided
> And they could never ever tear us apart
> (INXS, 'Never Tear Us Apart')

From the opening song, the 2004 director's cut renders an entirely different theme from the 2001 theatrical release. In the theatrical version, Echo & The Bunnymen inaugurates a primary existential question—fate versus free will—that the sci-fi frame of the film answers one way—fate—while the sliding narratives implicitly undercut to suggest not necessarily free will but certainly existential uncertainty. The director's cut, by contrast, commences with a passionate INXS song that poses not a question but a declaration regarding the superlative power of love. In suggesting the twin themes of multiple realities and coming-of-age love, it sets the tone for a cut of the film that valorizes sci-fi superheroics of self-sacrificial love above all else, especially paranoid schizophrenia.

In order to foreshadow the tragic events that are about to occur directly after the Halloween party, the theatrical release plays Joy Division's 'Love Will Tear Us Apart,' a song that recognizes both the authentic and the doomed nature of Donnie and Gretchen's intersubjectivity. The director's cut foregoes music and sound in a slow motion party sequence, and when playback returns to normal speed, the audience is treated to an *instrumental* version of Echo & The Bunnymen's 'The Killing Moon.' 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' is reduced from the prominent Halloween party scene to being played at low volume over the car radio during a scene between Donnie and his father. Both the existential question posed by Echo & The Bunnymen and the existential love espoused by Joy Division are effectively erased from the director's cut.

Richard Kelly adds graphical insert after graphical insert of Roberta Sparrow's *The Philosophy of Time Travel* to his director's cut. In the theatrical release, we know that Donnie's world view is affected by the book, and cult fans can go to the official website to read it. However, by intercutting chapters from the book into the frame narrative, the director's cut privileges the reality of time travel. Film viewers learn, 'If a Tangent Universe occurs, it will be highly unstable, sustaining itself for no longer than several weeks. Eventually it will collapse upon itself, forming a black hole within the Primary Universe capable of destroying all existence.' Donnie is a 'Living Receiver' who must find an 'Artifact' near 'the Vortex' and return it to the Primary Universe. Frank is a 'Manipulated Dead,' who has died in the Tangent Universe and contacts Donnie through the 'Fourth Dimensional Construct' (the bathroom mirror). Moreover, Frank has set an 'Ensurance Trap' (killing Gretchen and setting up Donnie's mother and sister to die on the plane) to compel Donnie to return the Artifact to the Primary Universe. The book so elucidates the sci-fi world of the film that it trumps other readings. Gone are the significance of Frank's art, the quandary regarding Donnie's schizophrenic suicide, and the subtle yet universally human fantasies and dreams comprising Donnie's emotional and moral coming-of-age

tale. Anecdotally speaking, when I taught the film, two students signed up for a discussion board response to summarize and ask questions about the film. The student who watched the theatrical release in class asked many questions involving whether Donnie was a martyr or a schizophrenic. The student who was absent from class but watched the director's cut at home essentially reproduced *The Philosophy of Time Travel* in her response, asked no questions, and considered only the sci-fi reading of the film.

In *The Infinite Conversation* (1992), Maurice Blanchot offers this definition of the tragic man:

> Tragic man lives in the extreme tension between contraries, going from a yes and no confusedly merged back to a yes and a no that are clear and clearly preserved in their opposition. He does not see man as a passable mixture of middling qualities and honest failings, but as an unendurable meeting of extreme grandeur and extreme destitution, an incongruous nothingness in which the two infinites collide. (p. 99)

By extension, one could argue that the lived tension between two, three, or four ontological statuses comprises the tragic art of *Donnie Darko*. The theatrical version of *Donnie Darko* is tragic precisely because 1) its protagonist impossibly suffers three worlds: the real, the dream, and the delusion and 2) its viewer experiences four: the science fiction movie, the dream film, the psychotic movie, and the art film. In explaining away both Donnie's dream and delusion, the director's cut evacuates his tragedy—and nullifies the potential for art.

The director's cut sacrifices the delusional possibility of the theatrical release for a divine, metaphysical mandate: Donnie is not psychotic; instead he is solely and singularly a heroic receiver of God's master plan who must save the world from collapsing parallel universes. By contrast, the feature film affords multiple ontological foundations and, consequently, rich analytical opportunity: Where is Donnie? Who is Donnie? What is *Donnie*? In the director's cut, certainty replaces ambiguity and certitude usurps doubt. Whereas the feature film allows us to view Donnie Darko as a tragic existential hero traversing the absurd world and tarrying with the limits of experience, the director's cut compels us to see him as a sci-fi messiah with a mandate to save the world with his resplendent sacrifice. The human being's—the character Donnie Darko's—existence is reduced to essence and the work of art, the film *Donnie Darko*, is devalued to propaganda reminiscent of the Love/Fear Lifeline that it mocks.

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